

data brief

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AN ENROLLMENT SNAPSHOT OF YOUTH IN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS FOR SELECTED CALIFORNIA URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICTS

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This data brief provides an enrollment snapshot of youth in the Continuation High Schools and district-operated Community Day Schools (“alternative schools”) for youth over the age of 16 in the following Unified School Districts: Long Beach, Los Angeles, Fresno, and Oakland. Unless otherwise noted, these data are reported at the district level. We estimate that our sample of four districts represents approximately 20 percent of the alternative school population across the state.

Key Findings

- I. Among districts examined, the October 1 student enrollment in alternative schools represented 61 percent of annual cumulative enrollment in those schools. By contrast, in comprehensive high schools, the October 1 enrollment count represented 96 percent of cumulative annual enrollment. (see Table 1).
- II. Across alternative schools, 89 percent of students are enrolled for at least 45 days. Seventy percent of students are enrolled for 90 days or more. Length of enrollment varies significantly by school type and district. (see Figure 3).
- III. Between 28 percent and 41 percent of students (depending on the district) are enrolled in alternative schools continuously from October 1 to April 1. (see Figure 3).

About the California Alternative Schools Data Series

The California Department of Education (CDE) identifies more than 800 public alternative schools across the state (predominantly high schools) designed to meet the needs of credit-deficient and other youth who are vulnerable to dropping out before completing the minimum requirements for a regular high school diploma. Some of these schools, including Continuation High Schools and Community Day Schools, are defined by legislative statute, while others may self-identify as alternative schools if they meet minimum eligibility criteria set by the State Board of Education (SBE) for the enrollment of youth at risk of dropping out of school. California law contemplates more intensive services and accelerated credit accrual strategies in these schools so that students might have a renewed opportunity to complete the required academic courses of instruction to graduate. Currently, the CDE is developing a new school- and district accountability framework and data dashboard for alternative schools that are aligned with Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAP) for all public schools.

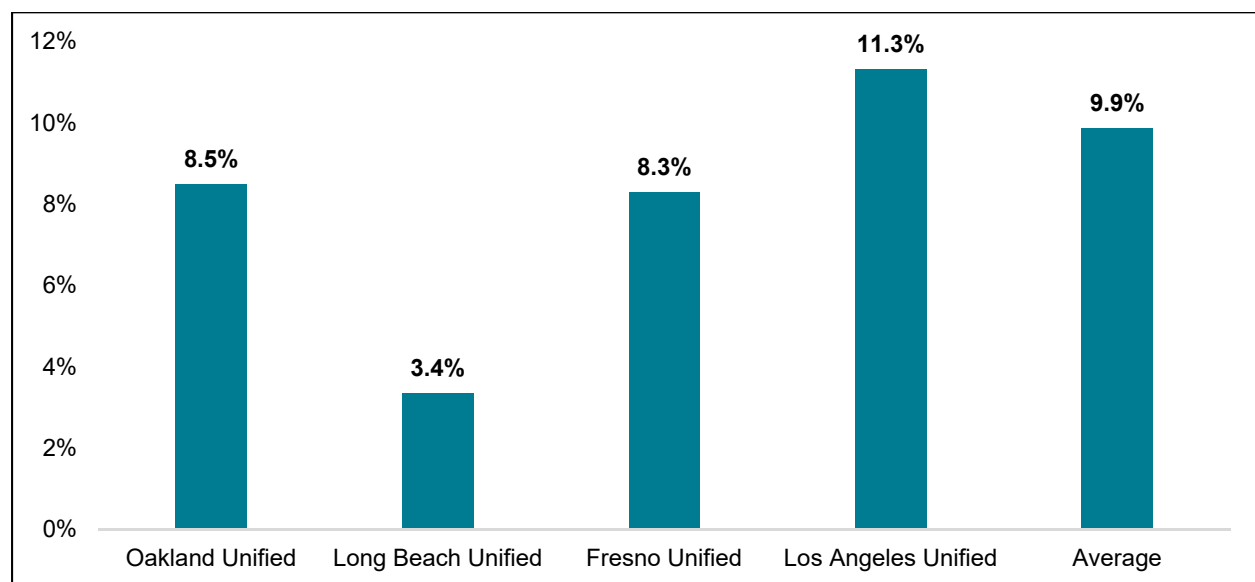
Background

Alternative high schools (e.g., Continuation and Community Day Schools) serve between 10 and 15 percent of California's high school students. Continuation high schools make up the largest sector of alternative options. In the 2017-18 school year, 51,811 students were enrolled across 435 public continuation schools.¹ The high mobility rates among students in these schools, however, suggests that total annual cumulative enrollments will be substantially higher than the initial October census count. In 2013-14, for example, the California Legislative Analyst's Office found that, while the October enrollment census of Continuation High Schools was 62,830, the same schools reported enrolling almost 104,000 students by the end of the school year. Ultimately, there is limited publicly reported data available about these schools.

Findings

Enrollment in Alternative Settings

Figure 1. Percent of 10th through 12th grade students in our school district sample who enrolled in a Continuation High School or district-operated Community Day School for any length of time during the 2015-16 school year.



On average, 9.9 percent of 10th through 12th grade students in our sample were enrolled in a Continuation or Community Day School at some point during the 2015-16 school year. District enrollment in alternative options varied from a low of 3.4 percent of students in Long Beach Unified School District to a high of 11.3 percent of student in Los Angeles Unified School District. Across the four districts, alternative schools serve a sizable portion of the high school population: 15,000 students out of 151,927 10th through 12th grade students in our sample.

¹ October Enrollment count, California Department of Education, CalEdFacts. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/cb/ceffingertipfacts.asp>. Accessed 7/31/2018.

Table 1. Cumulative count of alternative school students enrolled during the 2015-16 school year, count of alternative school students enrolled by October, and percent of all cumulatively enrolled students enrolled by October, by district

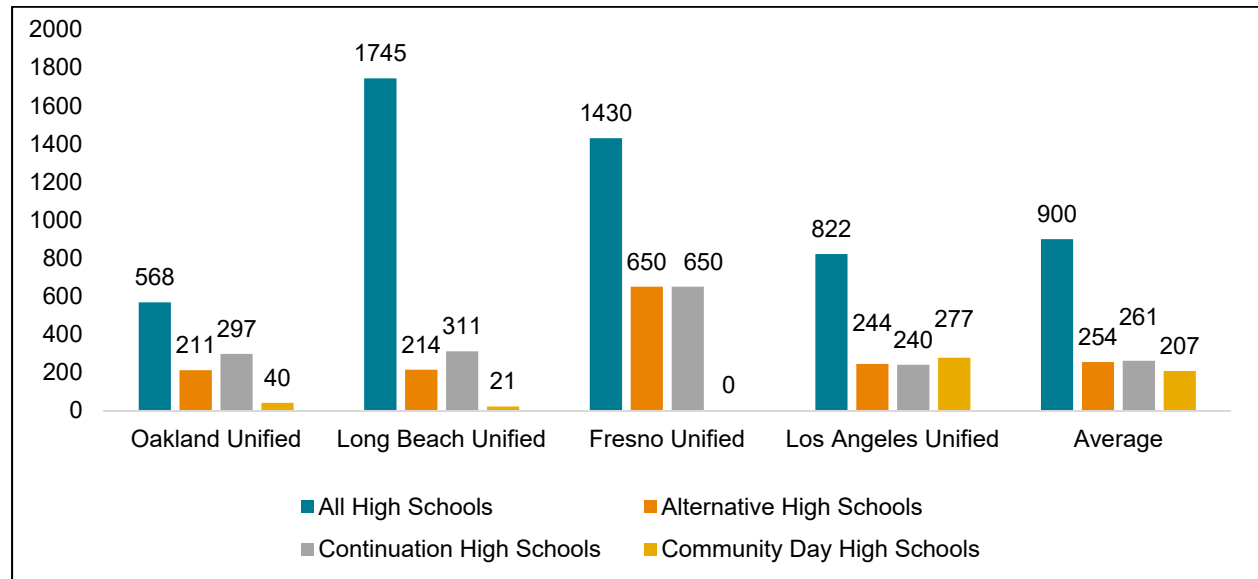
School District	Cumulative Enrollment Count	October 1st Enrollment Count	Percent of Alternative School Students Represented in the October 1 st Count
Oakland Unified	633	349	55.1%
Long Beach Unified	642	427	66.5%
Fresno Unified	1,299	887	68.3%
Los Angeles Unified	12,426	7515	60.5%
Total	15,000	9178	61.2%

Across the districts, 61.2 percent of students who enrolled in alternative schools at some point during the 2015-16 school year are captured by the October 1st count.² This proportion varies from 55.1% in Oakland Unified School District to 68.3% in Fresno Unified School District. While it is clear that alternative schools are enrolling many more students than are represented in the October 1 count, the extent to which this count differs from cumulative enrollment varies by district.

² Statewide estimates from the California Department of Education range from 50 to 60 percent of alternative students enrolled by October. See Continuation Education – CalEdFacts.
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/eo/ce/cefcontinuationed.asp>. Accessed 7/31/2018.

Alternative School Size

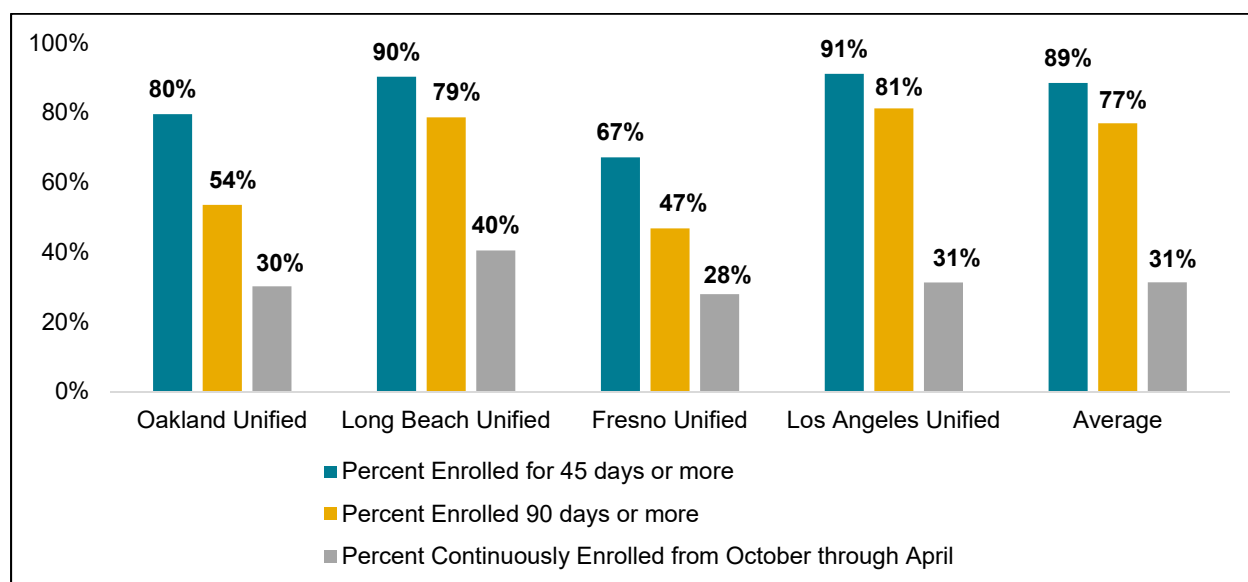
Figure 2. Average number of total students served by each high school type over the 2015-16 school year, by school type and district.



Out of a total of 242 high schools in our sample, 59 are alternative schools: 52 Continuation High Schools and 7 Community Day Schools. The size of high schools in our sample varies, with schools in Oakland serving an average of 568 students over the course of the 2015-16 school year, while the average school in the Long Beach Unified School District served 1745 students over the course of the year. Alternative high schools tended to serve smaller numbers of students compared to the average high school. Across all four districts, alternative high schools served an average of 254 students per school, compared to an average of 900 students per school across all schools. Community Day Schools were much smaller in Oakland and Long Beach, serving 40 and 21 students over the course of the school year, respectively. However, the average district-operated Community Day School in the Los Angeles Unified School District served approximately 277 students.

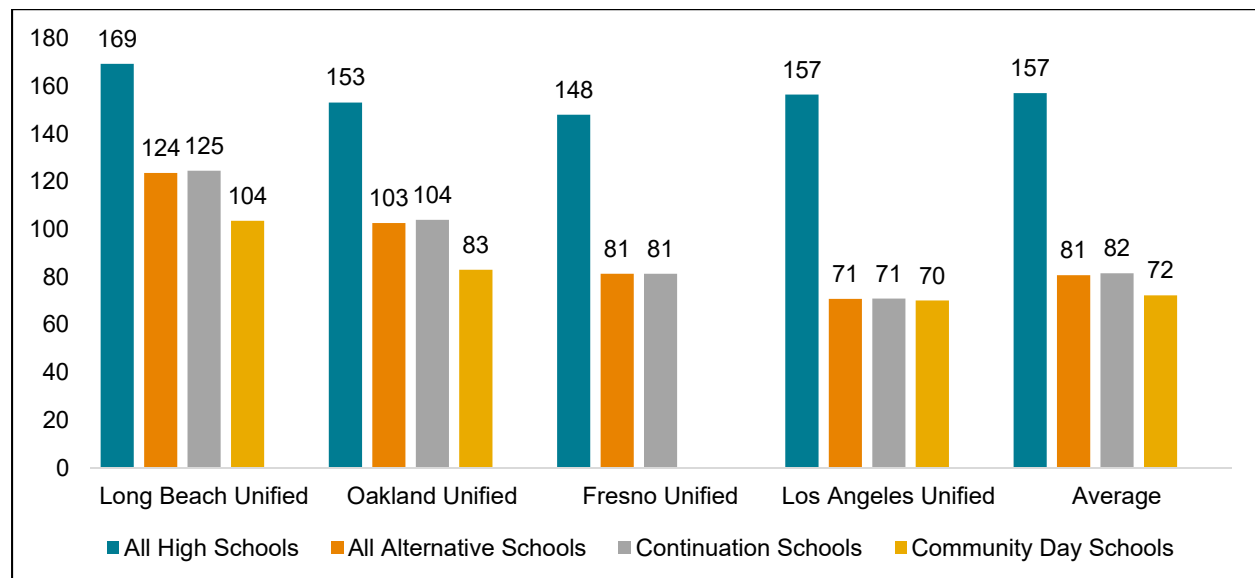
Length of Enrollment in Alternative Schools

Figure 3. Length of Enrollment: Proportion of students enrolled for 45 days or more, proportion enrolled for 90 days or more, and proportion enrolled continuously from October 1 to April 1 during the 2015-16 school year, by district.



Across our sample, an average of 88.6 percent of alternative school students were enrolled for 45 days or more, and 77 percent of students were enrolled for at least 90 days. An even smaller number, 31.4 percent, were enrolled continuously from October 1st to April 1st. These proportions vary by district, with 45-day enrollment ranging from a low of 67.2 percent in the Fresno Unified School District to a high of 91.2 percent in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Long Beach Unified School District had the highest proportion of students continuously enrolled in alternative settings, at 40.5 percent, while Fresno Unified School District had the lowest, at 27.9 percent. In general, districts with higher proportions of students enrolled for 45 days or more also tended to have high proportions of students enrolled for 90 days or more. Los Angeles Unified and Long Beach Unified were on the higher end of this spectrum with about 80 percent of students enrolled for at least 90 days, while the proportions in Oakland Unified and Fresno Unified were closer to 50 percent. These patterns suggest variation in district policies regarding identification and placement in alternative schools as well as policies for transfer back into comprehensive schools.

Figure 4. Average number of days enrolled during the 2015-16 school year, by school type, by district, and across all districts.



While high school students tended to be enrolled longer across all high schools (157 cumulative days) than in alternative schools (81 cumulative days), the typical length of enrollment varied significantly from district to district. Los Angeles Unified School District had the largest gap in length of enrollment between alternative high schools (71 cumulative days) and the average high school (157 cumulative days). Long Beach Unified had the longest typical enrollment across all school types. On average, alternative schools served the typical student for about 80 cumulative days during the school year. At the high end of the spectrum in Oakland Unified and Long Beach Unified School Districts, the average alternative student was enrolled for more than 100 cumulative days during the 2015-16 school year. These averages represent approximately 40 percent of the school year for districts on the low end, and 55-70 percent of the school year for districts on the higher end.